

Teaching Relationships: Modern and Ancient Contexts and Concepts in Ancient Greco-Roman Poetry

This project focuses on finding ways for students to identify with a text, which is a recognized best practice in pedagogy for retaining student interest, which in turn can affect student performance. This goal can be tricky when dealing with texts, characters, and stories from times and places far removed from student life experiences. I have been developing an approach to teach ancient Classical texts (in translation) including *The Iliad*, lyrics of Catullus, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, based on values and relationships in these texts. This approach makes these texts more approachable and relatable for students because it addresses contemporary concepts they have some familiarity and experience with including personal issues like gender, identity, romance incl. consent, friendship, and personal reputation.

Using this approach, students in my World Literature I surveys have considered *The Iliad* from the perspective of male-female, male-male, and parent-child relationships. Students are drawn to the relationships of Achilles with his mother and with Patroclus, which allows for comparisons between his ideas and treatment of Briseis, as well as providing opportunities for students to consider the nature and depths of a variety of relationships, and compare and contrast them with their own beliefs and experiences. The nature of Achilles and Patroclus together in particular invites the obvious questions about possible non-hetero/cis-gender relationships in the ancient world, but also about the possibility for exploring male friendships and masculinity. Students are often confounded and interested by Achilles' habit of crying to his mother when he runs into difficulties, which provides students with a way of thinking about parent-child relationships as well as considering how Achilles might compare and contrast with other ancient epic heroes such as Gilgamesh or Rama.

The lyrics of Catullus allow students to consider a variety of romantic relationships, not just in a gendered context, but also in terms of toxicity as well as explore the question of poetic versus biographical realities. One student recently observed, “It’s too real”, explaining to a classmate that he really identified with some of the emotions in the poetry. Another student noticed that a Juvenius poem (Carmen 48) was almost a parallel to a poem addressed to Lesbia (the ‘many kisses’ in Carmen 5), leading to a discussion of “Is Catullus actually bi-sexual?”, or is he doing a poetic voice experiment? This observation provided students with a way to get into details of the language and style, even in the translation.

The selections from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (from Books 9 and 10) covers male-female and parent-child relationships in ways that are distinct from previous Greek and Roman literature students had encountered. Students were able to consider gender identity in the story of Iphis as well as parent-child issues which they then compare and contrast with the story of Myrrha and her family. In addition to the questions of consent, right and wrong, and dysfunction, students also focused on the romantic trials of multiple generations, inducing one student to wonder “What’s wrong with that family?” upon realization that Myrrha is a direct descendant of Pygmalion.

While some of these texts prove challenging for some students for personal reasons, such as personal violence in Ovid, language in Catullus, and war in Homer, using relationships as the key focal theme has generated some interest as well as more critical observations from students than more historical or literary based approaches that I have previously used.

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